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FM AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE
TO RUEHHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0874
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L LIBREVILLE 000037

SIPDIS

DEPT ALSO FOR AF/C LISA KORTE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/23/2019
TAGS: [EAIR](#) [ECON](#) [EINV](#) [GB](#) [TP](#)
SUBJECT: GABON REFORMS CIVIL AVIATION AMID CONCERNs OVER
SAFETY

Classified By: DCM Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Civil aviation in Gabon is in disarray. Since July 2008, the European Union has imposed safety-related restrictions on all Gabon-certified air carriers, including a complete ban on most companies. In response, Gabon is scrambling to put in place a new, independent civil aviation authority, aimed at ensuring the safety of airline passengers and employees and thus bringing an end to the EU ban. Embassy Libreville, with limited resources or expertise, is attempting to monitor the safety of available air carriers in order to minimize the risks associated with necessary travel within Gabon and to and from Sao Tome. END SUMMARY.

EU Imposes Comprehensive Ban

¶2. (U) On July 24, 2008, the European Union's committee for aviation safety imposed restrictions on all companies certified by Gabon's civil aviation authorities. Banned carriers include Solenta Aviation Gabon, Sky Gabon, Nouvelle Air Affaires Gabon, SCD Aviation, Nationale et Regionale Transport, Air Services SA, and Air Tourist (Allegiance). Two carriers, Gabon Airlines and Afrijet, are permitted to enter Europe, but are restricted to their present levels of operations.

¶3. (U) According to official EU sources, the present ban resulted from two separate audits, both of which identified significant safety deficiencies on the part of Gabon's civil aviation authority as well as the airlines it oversees. In 2007, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) carried out a Universal Safety Oversight Audit and reported major shortcomings in the capacity and performance of Gabon's civil aviation authority, which had failed to implement more than 93% of the ICAO standards. The ICAO audit was followed by French inspections through the Safety Assessment of Foreign Aircraft program (SAFA), which produced evidence of serious, systematic breaches of safety in the operations of the air carriers certified in Gabon.

¶4. (C) In response to the negative audit results and in anticipation of the EU ban, the government of Gabon undertook to reform its civil aviation oversight system, adopting a new civil aviation law in May 2008 and, two months later, a law ordering the establishment of a new, independent National Civil Aviation Agency (ANAC). Gabonese authorities reportedly told the EU that the new civil aviation system would be operational by December 2008. Gabon anticipated the lifting of the EU ban by November 2008, when the EU committee on aviation safety met in Brussels to review the EU blacklist of banned airlines. However, the committee concluded that

progress had been insufficient to lift the ban. Specifically, the committee noted that at the time of their meeting, ANAC had yet to find a director or other key personnel, and that ANAC did not have the physical infrastructure necessary to support its activities. The committee also questioned the degree of ANAC's independence, concluding that the ultimate authority to oversee civil aviation still rests with the Ministry of Transportation.

¶ 15. (C) Following the November meeting of the EU committee on aviation safety, the government of Gabon requested that the ICAO provide technical assistance, at Gabon's expense, towards making the ANAC operational and carrying out other reforms necessary for a lifting of the EU ban. Three ICAO advisors, former Air France pilots, arrived in late November 2008 to work with the ANAC and the banned air carriers for a period of between six and eighteen months. A fourth technical advisor was expected to join the team in January ¶ 2009. The goal of the ongoing ICAO technical mission is to have the ANAC up to speed in time for the next EU aviation safety committee meeting on March 24-26, 2009. However, one of the ICAO advisors indicated that three months is the minimum amount of time that the process will require, and that it might very well take longer to achieve. He told us, "It is serious. From what I've seen so far, the system needs a serious overhaul."

Mission Response

¶ 16. (U) In light of the EU ban and other developments, the Mission is attempting to minimize the risks associated with

air travel by mission staff and visitors. Official travel is not permitted on all but one of the affected airlines. Mission personnel continue to fly on Air Service, one of the airlines currently banned by the EU. Embassy Libreville also continues to attempt to monitor the overall safety of civil aviation in Gabon, within the severe limits of our expertise and resources. Air Service is the only commercial air carrier with flights from Libreville to Sao Tome, a country to which we are accredited (and home to both resident USG personnel and significant local and TDY staff). We note that no U.S. government agency "bans" foreign carriers or otherwise grades their safety if those carriers do not fly to the United States, and that responsibility for direct mission personnel to use or not use specific airlines rests with the Chief of Mission.

¶ 17. (U) In evaluating whether or not to continue using Air Service despite the EU ban, we interviewed the airline's deputy general manager, Arthur Bongo Ondimba, the son of Gabon's president El Hajj Omar Bongo Ondimba (and also a pilot). We also interviewed the company's chief of maintenance, an American citizen. Both asserted that Air Service meets or exceeds international maintenance and safety standards, and claimed the airline is being penalized for the shortcomings of Gabon's civil aviation regulatory regime. Both pointed out that Royal Dutch Shell, a company with extensive operations in Gabon, carries out independent safety inspections and continues to make extensive use of Air Service aircraft, for both regularly scheduled and charter flights. The Embassy confirmed independently that Shell and other international oil firms remain major customers for Air Service. Against this positive evidence we weighed negative reports, both direct and second-hand, from former Air Service employees questioning the airline's safety. Finally, we sought an evaluation by one of the visiting ICAO technical advisors. He declined to comment on the safety of Air Service or any of the other banned airlines, saying he and his team needed more time and information to make a sound judgment.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Gabon clearly needs, and does not yet have, a competent and independent civil aviation authority. Some of the steps Gabon has taken in response to the EU ban, particularly the invitation and funding of the ICAO technical assistance mission, are encouraging. We will continue to monitor the situation, encourage the government to take the necessary steps to correct deficiencies, and scrutinize closely the airlines used by mission personnel for official travel. In the absence of authoritative guidance from the FAA or other competent U.S. government agency, however, we will be far more comfortable if and when the EU ban is lifted. END COMMENT.

REDDICK